DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 802 HE 022 463

AUTHOR	Church, Kathleen
TITLE	Undergraduate Literacy Programs at Arizona Universities.
INSTITUTION	Arizona Board of Regents, Phoenix.
PUB DATE	Nov 88
NOTE	11p.; In "The Arizona Board of Regents' Task Force on Excellence, Efficiency, and Competitiveness. Final Report and Working Papers." Volume One. For Volumes One and Two, see HE 022 446-447. For individual working papers, see HE 022 448-480 and HE 022 482-501.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Basic Skills; College Freshmen; Competition; *Educational Quality; Efficiency; Excellence in Education; Higher Education; *Literacy; Minority Groups; Public Colleges; State Universities; Undergraduate Study; Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Arizona; Arizona State University; Arizona Task Force on Excellence Efficiency Compet; Northern Arizona University; University of Arizona

ABSTRACT

One of the papers in the final report by the the Arizona Board of Regents' Task Force on Excellence, Efficiency and Competitiveness, this report looks at the state's undergraduate literacy programs. It has been acknowledged that literacy is the central problem of undergraduate education in America. Six theoretical principles for excellent literacy programs are presented; among these are: developing the ability to write is critical to the development of higher order thinking, and an excellent writing program recognizes that writing instructors should be trained to teach writing. Composition programs at Arizona's universities are noted, with general observations made about the freshman composition programs. Also discussed are developmental programs and educationally disadvantaged minorities, upper division composition programs, and the upper division writing proficiency examination. Four conclusions are made; among these are: the level of resources devoted to the University of Arizona literacy programs is envied by rhetoric and composition faculties at the other universities, and all three universities are in the process of developing rigorous upper division writing requirements for all students. Seven recommendations stress the importance of finding methods of funding literacy education that reflect its cross-disciplinary nature, reducing the size of college composition classes, and developing incentives to encourage more faculty to participate in coherent writing across the curriculum programs. (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED306802

UNDERGRADUATE LITERACY PROGRAMS AT ARIZONA UNIVERSITIES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

KATHLEEN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

During the last quarter century, an information explosion has occurred in many disciplines that traditionally comprise an undergraduate education. Derek Bok, in his 1986 treatise, Higher Learning stated it well: "More new biomedical knowledge has accumulated since the discovery of the structure of DNA in 1960 {more accurately, 1953} than in all of the previous generations. More books have been published since World War II than in all the preceding centuries." The information explosion has generated, and continues to generate polemic discussions about what and how much should be included in curriculum of the undergraduate student. Concurrent with the information explosion, opportunities to participate in higher education have been extended to a less homogeneous spectrum of students, and the overall basic skills level of students entering the universities has declined. The combination of these factors has created a dilemma for higher education. While the information explosion requires an expanded, and in many scientific disciplines a more resource intensive curriculum, more and more resources have had to be diverted from traditional disciplines into programs teaching skills that in the past had been mastered by almost all high school graduates who had chosen to pursue higher education.

While one can offer cogent arguments about why universities ought not to divert resources into remediation, and many legislators and policy makers have offered such arguments, the fact remains that most institutions of higher education have recognized that expecting the K-12 educational system to succeed with all its graduates is futile. Much discussion about improving K-12 has occurred but little change has been brought about by the discussion. Nowhere has this point been demonstrated so clearly as in the state of New Jersey.

A decade ago the New Jersey Board of Higher Education made the commitment to confront the issue of basic skills performance of high school graduates. Its mandate called for

1. basic skills testing of all Freshmen entering public colleges and universities, and

2. the evaluation of remedial programs at each institution.

Kathleen Church is a geneticist with her PhD from UC, Berkeley. After three years of post-doctoral research, she joined the Department of Zoology at ASU in 1969. Honored for both the quality of research and the quality of her teaching, she has received ten research grants, authored more than 40 research articles, and served as Department Chair at ASU and as visiting professor at York and Duke Universities.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

AZ Board of Regents

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

HE 022 463

A Basic Skills Council, working under contract with the Educational Testing Service, created its own criterion-referenced test, the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test. The test has now been used to place over 500,000 students at 30 public colleges and 11 private institutions in the state. Unfortunately, the test results have remained constant over the 10 year period. The percentage of students entering higher education without the requisite basic skills has not diminished. The most recent data (Fall, 1986) indicate that 33% of the students lack proficiency in verbal skills, 47% in computation, and 60% in elementary algebra. It can be argued that the most important basic skill that an individual must possess to function in today's complex society is facility with the spoken and written word.

The importance placed on writing skills by the citizens of Arizona can be inferred from the results of a recent opinion poll concerning Arizona Public Education conducted by Arizona State University. Approximately eighty percent of those polled perceived that not enough emphasis was placed on writing skills in the public schools. Task Force Staff discussions with employers of graduates of Arizona's universities revealed that while employers appreciated the excellent technical training of these graduates, they had difficulty in recruiting adequately literate college graduates. A concern frequently expressed to the Staff by faculty from all three universities was their frustration in coping with writing deficiencies among the students. Indeed it has been acknowledged nationally that literacy is THE central problem of undergraduate education in America.

THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES FOR EXCELLENT LITERACY PROGRAMS

Excellent literacy programs must be built upon solid theoretical foundations. The Directors of Composition at Arizona's universities offer the following six principles as critical to excellent literacy education:

1. The acquisition of literacy is an ongoing process. Literacy is never really mastered but continues to develop along with increasingly difficult academic challenges students meet as they mature and their education progresses.

2. Developing the ability to write is critical to the development of higher order thinking ability in all academic areas.

3. The context in which students are expected to write determines the level of challenge to their thinking and writing competence.

4. An excellent writing program recognizes that writing instructors should be trained to teach writing and should be knowledgeable about contemporary research and theory in the teaching of writing.

5. Excellent contemporary writing programs have rejected "skills" approaches and have adopted a variety of alternatives that have in common their focus on the processes that lead up to the written product, an emphasis on revision and editing, and a reintegration of reading, writing, listening, and thinking.

Arizona's universities are currently addressing the problems of literacy in diverse ways. However, literacy

programs have not received priority in funding commensurate with their importance to a quality education for undergraduate students. University writing requirements and the means of satisfying them cut across departmental and disciplinary lines. Freshman writing at all three institutions is a University requirement, even though it is taught by the English department. Departments and Colleges that house composition programs probably ought not to be required to shoulder the entire financial burden for writing instruction.

COMPOSITION PROGRAMS AT ARIZONA'S UNIVERSITIES

FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Of the three Arizona universities, the University of Arizona offers the most integrated and comprehensive composition program. The program is multifaceted and involves several levels of competency, the first being Freshman Composition. Students are placed on the basis of their performance on a written, holistically graded placement essay administered at the time of first registration and their performance on the English section of the American College Test (ACT), the Test of Standard Written English or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). A student who is diagnosed as having deficiencies in writing ability must complete three semesters of Freshman English rather than two. Currently, approximately one-third of the freshmen students entering the university are placed in English 100, the developmental writing course, and university credit is awarded upon completion of the course. A student must pass the course to progress in the Freshman Composition sequence. Interestingly, the proportion of students requiring the developmental course did not change with the 1987-88 entering freshmen even though that group represents the first cohort admitted under new and more stringent high school curricular requirements. The latter observation is somewhat surprising although perhaps not a fair assessment of the impact of the new admission requirements. The written placement examination used by the University is not a normed examination. A possible problem with holistically graded essays is that the criteria for passing may change from year to year depending on the cohort of individuals who act as readers of the essays.

All students, other than those placed into the developmental course, must complete two semesters of Freshman English. Students with advanced writing abilities are served by a special two semester sequence. Freshman Composition courses are taught exclusively by faculty associates and graduate assistants at UA.

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

At Arizona State University, students are placed into appropriate courses according to their scores on the SAT Verbal or the ACT English tests. Most students satisfy the University's First-Year Composition requirement by successfully completing English 101 and English 102 or its equivalent addressing the special needs of non-native speakers. Students who earn appropriately high standardized test scores may meet the University First-Year Composition requirement by taking English 105, a concentrated advanced course. The few students who earn scores of 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement Test in English are exempted from First-year Composition at ASU.

Students in all composition courses may seek individual tutorials through the Writing Center. All sections of First-Year composition courses, with rare exceptions, are taught by graduate assistants and faculty associates. Although the National Council of Teachers of English recommend that composition classes have not more that 20 students, the class size for First-Year Composition courses is set at 27.

Until the fall of 1986, ASU had made no provision for students admitted to the university but unprepared to meet the demands of English 101. ASU adopted the posture that "remediation is not an appropriate function of the university. " Instead, to address the need for a developmental writing course, the ASU administration proposed that a course from the Maricopa County Community College District course inventory, English 071 Review of English Fundamentals, be offered on the ASU campus by community college faculty. The parallel is the developmental writing course (English 100) offered at UA, but the community college option was selected as more economical in spite of the protests of the ASU English Department, especially the rhetoric and composition specialists. A small pilot project was run in the fall of 1986. In the fall of 1987, all students who had low scores on the ACT English (16 or lower) or the SAT verbal (380) or lower were required to take and pass English 071 before enrolling in English 101. The course is designed and taught by faculty from South Mountain Community College and does not carry university credit. Approximately 500 students--15% of incoming freshmen--placed into English 071 in the fall of 1987, and one study conducted that semester indicated that additional 500 students who placed into English 101 were not prepared for the rigors of that course. The Director of Composition and staff are currently seeking funds to develop procedures for placing students more accurately. The Director is also working with faculty from South Mountain Community College to develop an English 071 syllabus coordinated with the entrance proficiencies for English 101.

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

The composition program at NAU occupies a key position in the undergraduate curriculum. Most students are required to take two writing courses in their first year at the University: English 101 and 102. Exceptions to this requirement include a) students placed in the honors program who may fulfill their composition requirement with a single course, English 197, b) students who have taken advanced placement in high school and c) students who have taken the standardized CLEP examination and have achieved an appropriately high score. Like ASU, Northern Arizona University students requiring developmental work are now (beginning Fall 1985) required to complete an appropriate basic writing course offered by Yavapai Community College on the NAU campus. Unlike ASU, students completing the developmental course are retested prior to their placement in English Composition. Students are placed in the developmental course, English 101 or English 197-Honors on the basis of a placement examination administered to virtually all students entering the university. Students are given one hour to write on a topic supplied by the English Department. These essays are holistically scored by a team of trained readers from the English Department. Students in the developmental course who receive less

than a grade of B must retake the placement examination prior to registration for English Composition. The most recent results demonstrated that of the 100 students who completed the developmental course, 67 showed enough improvement to enter the English Composition sequence.

For this coming year, approximately 10% of the sections of English 101 and English 102 are taught by tenured or tenure track faculty. The remainder of the sections are taught by part-time faculty and graduate assistants. The graduate assistants are under the supervision of the Director of Composition. The graduate assistants are also required to participate in an intensive training program consisting of a week-long summer workshop, a monitoring system with full-time faculty, weekly staff meetings and a graduate level course in composition theory. The TAs teach from a standardized syllabus. Class sizes are limited to 25 students.

As a result of a Ford Foundation Grant recently received by the English Department, a pilot program will be implemented Fall semester, 1988, that is expected to address more effectively the needs of NAU's minority students. The pilot will consist of "intensified" sections of English 101 that will carry 6 credit hours (rather than 3), and will have a ceiling on student enrollment at 12. The pilot is based upon the highly successful basic reading/writing program at the University of Pittsburgh.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE FRESHMAN COMPOSITION PROGRAMS

An examination of Freshman Composition programs at the three Arizona universities demonstrates that different approaches are being used to address problems of literacy. For example, different placement criteria are used and significantly different numbers of students are deemed to be in need of developmental basic writing instruction. While a complete analysis of resource utilization was not undertaken, it is clear that major differences exist. NAU utilizes tenured or tenure-track faculty for instruction in many English Composition sections while teaching assistants and faculty associates are utilized at the larger universities. UA compensates faculty associates and teaching assistants at significantly higher rates than does ASU. ASU and UA compensate graduate teaching assistants at a higher rate than does NAU. The use of community colleges for developmental progams by NAU and ASU is cheaper than integrating basic writing into the university curriculum as is the more common practice in American universities and the path chosen by UA. Furthermore, due to the different placement criteria, UA requires 3 semester of freshman English for a greater proportion of students than do ASU or NAU. In addition UA requires a minimum of 2 semesters of Freshman English for all students while only one semester is required of advanced placement students and honors students at ASU and NAU respectively. Finally UA and NAU uses a more expensive method for placement than ASU which relies on an examination already paid for by the student.

Although the universities differ in their general approach to the development of literacy skills during the freshman year, until recently there has been, little effort to assess the success of developmental efforts or the freshman composition programs in general. This is primarily because student information systems

were either not in place or not easily accessible to individuals involved in the programs. Based on resource investment into the programs, UA and NAU are the clear leaders. If one defines quality by process, at least one outside consultant has agreed that the program at UA is among the best in the nation. Nevertheless, in the absence of outcome measures, the cost effectiveness of the program remains in question.

Most experts in rhetoric and composition now agree that because of the deficient writing skills of many entering freshmen, basic writing must have an established place in the university curriculum. Additionally, the university itself should offer the course as part of its first year composition program. The fact that ASU and NAU administration have the community colleges provide basic writing instruction represents a departure from the path chosen by most major universities. Indeed the action might be described as an interesting experiment, whose detractors would include almost everyone connected with university basic writing pedagogy. The results of the experiment should be carefully monitored if the detractors are ever to be silenced. Proven developmental programs must be available if the universities are to attract and retain minority students. Currently, ASU is undertaking a systematic study of the impact of the developmental course furnished by South Mountain Community College. The results of the study will be available some time next year.

Even if the developmental courses at ASU and NAU are having a positive impact on the writing skills of those who participate, there are many philosophical reasons to oppose the arrangements which should be considered. For example, is it right to admit students to the university, accept their money and refuse to commit university resources to meeting their educational needs? Many would argue that it is poor educational practice to stigmatize developmental writing students by placing them in a non-credit course taught by someone else's faculty.

The effectiveness of developmental programs is beginning to be questioned nationwide; at least two states are investing resources to assess effectiveness on a state-wide basis. New Jersey's program is well established, whereas Texas is in the process of implementing such a program. Follow-up studies on the effectiveness of developmental programs in New Jersey have demonstrated that the university two-year survival rate for students in need of help and who complete the developmental program is double that of those who need the help but do not receive it. Furthermore, the survival rate of the former is not significantly different from those students who were not in need of developmental help. The point to be taken is that there are successful developmental programs.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMS AND EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED MINORITIES

Nationally, developmental basic writing courses are populated disproportionately by educationally disadvantaged minorities. Although information concerning the Arizona universities is difficult to obtain, we do know that at NAU, more than 60% of those enrolled in the fall 1985 developmental basic writing course were minority students. It has been demonstrated many times that higher retention rates of educationally

disadvantaged students can be achieved. For example, UA has developed two especially successful programs for disadvantaged undergraduate students. The Writing Skills Improvement Program and the Summer Institute for Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum have been demonstrated to be very successful. Graduation rates for students involved in the Writing Skills Improvement program were at least 27% higher than for a comparable group not involved in the program (Gonzales et al., 1986). At ASU, tutors are available at the Writing Center. Of the 637 students served during Fall, 1987, 30% were minority students. Of those being tutored, 54% showed an increase in their final grade compared with their pretutoring grade. Unfortunately, the number of students involved in these intensely personalized programs is small in comparison to those in need. For example, at ASU, the Writing Center -- for lack of both space and staff--had to turn away four out of five students seeking assistance. Through a matching grant from Apple Corporation, the Writing Center has, however, recently acquired 22 Macintosh computers which will soon be available to students for word processing and computer aided instruction. While other programs are available for personalized assistance (for example, the Learning Assistance Center at NAU), it is difficult to evaluate the programs because accountability studies have not been undertaken or the information could not be located by the Task Force Staff.

UPPER DIVISION COMPOSITION PROGRAMS

UPPER DIVISION WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION

The upper division writing program at UA was originally conceived by the Intercollegiate Writing Committee of the Academic Senate. Implementation of the program has been the responsibility of the University Composition Board (UCB). Financing of the UCB has, until recently, come from local funds. However, in 1986, through a successful decision package, the UCB is now state funded. Beginning in 1985, as part of the upper division writing program, UA introduced an Upper Division Writing Proficiency Examination (UDWPE). All students must take the examination after completing 40 hours of credit but before receiving 75 hours of credit. Students who do not perform satisfactorily cannot register for required upper division writing intensive courses until they complete further developmental work. A new, one-unit, five week long writing-intensive workshop, English 397, was instituted in Fall of 1986 as one option for completion of the developmental work. Colleges or departments in which a student majors may offer alternatives. The number of sections of English 397 has grown from 19 in 1986-87 to approximately 50 in 1987-88.

During 1986-87, 4992 students sat for the proficiency examination. Of these, 30% had unsatisfactory performance on this holistically graded examination. Thirty-four percent of transfer students performed unsatisfactorily while only 24% of the native UA students were deemed deficient in writing skills. Without appropriate controls in the data analysis, it is impossible to determine whether the superior performance is a result of more

talented students opting for the university initially or whether the university's lower division composition programs have had a positive impact on writing ability. According to one outside consultant, UA is the only major public Research I university of which he was aware, to have initiated an upper division writing proficiency examination for all students. ASU requires that students who receive a "D" in any First-Year Composition course successfully complete a written English proficiency Examination. A student who does not complete the examination successfully on the first try must enroll in an English course prescribed by the director of Freshman English. NAU does not require a writing proficiency examination.

Some states have mandated that upper division ("junior rising") examinations be administered to all students prior to initiating upper-division work. In Florida the examination (College Level Proficiency Examination) covers all basic skills (reading, language and mathematics) while in other states, the emphasis has been on reading and writing (for example, the Georgia Regents Examination). Many states (including Arizona) have instituted policies requiring the assessment of all basic skills prior to entry into teacher training. The goals for such assessment programs are varied. The most extreme use of such examinations is as a "gateway" to upper-division work. Students must pass the examination prior to progressing to the junior level. Those who do not, must exit the university.

The Task Force staff does not believe that standardized examinations should be used as a "gateway" in the Arizona institutions. Although well designed testing programs may provide useful comparative data in the aggregate, the companies which construct and market examinations caution against the use of standardized tests as the sole measure of an individual student's abilities. In our view, there is no substitute for the collective judgment of classroom instructors over two years of college work by the student. The use of one or two test scores as the sole determinant of an individual student's future may well lead to a large number of judgments which are inaccurate and unfair to many individuals.

While the use of "junior rising" examinations as a gateway to the junior year may not be in the best interest of the Arizona universities, such examinations do offer opportunities which, in the long run, may benefit the institutions and the students. Such examinations can be used for institutional self- evaluation and can establish a data base for rational decision- making for program improvement, especially in lower division composition programs. All three institutions accept a substantial proportion of the student body as transfer students and the freshman composition programs in which they have participated, may differ from one another in significant ways. This reality complicates the "normative" value of testing all students who have been exposed to different programs. The skill level of the students can be expected to be uneven. However, the examinations, when combined with more traditional forms of assessment, could identify students with deficiencies to be corrected prior to the completion of the undergraduate experience.

WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

A student's writing ability will decline if the proficiency he/she develops in freshman English is not regularly challenged in required writing in subsequent courses (Kitzhaber, 1963). All three universities have recently established criteria for upper-division courses to be declared "writing intensive" and such courses are required of all students prior to graduation. Arizona State University has recently initiated a general studies core of courses which all undergraduates must complete. Writing intensive courses are a major requirement of the literacy component of the core. At least one outside consultant has commented that the new general studies core at ASU is one of the more rigorous that he has encountered. To be designated writing intensive (critical writing at ASU) the course must have advanced writing assignments in a specialized discipline. The courses are monitored by specific university faculty committees. NAU students must complete 14 courses that stress writing in order to graduate. Formal "writing across the curriculum" programs are also being initiated in Arizona universities. Such programs are increasing nationally and to be effective, it is recognized that they must have a strong faculty development component. Faculty from disciplines other than rhetoric and composition often have neither the skills nor the inclination to mentor students in the more salient components of critical writing. Recently, NAU and the ASU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) have received grants from the Ford Foundation to introduce formal "writing across the curriculum" concepts. With those funds, pilot programs have been initiated aimed at developing the appropriate skills in faculty from all disciplines within the college. The ASU, CLAS dissemination model may serve as a model for other colleges within the University or for that matter, other universities within the state. In our view the preferred alternative to upper division writing proficiency examinations is a curriculum in which students are expected to be able to write and in which students clearly understand that writing is as natural a part of course work as reading or laboratory observation. Such a curriculum not only checks the students' writing ability but, more importantly, continues what First-Year Composition started by contributing to the further development and sophistication of writing ability.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The level of resources devoted to the University of Arizona literacy programs is envied by rhetoric and composition faculties at the other universities. There has been no systematic attempt to assess the impact of the developmental writing course. The new student information services will make such assessments possible. The Upper-Division Writing Proficiency Examination assesses the writing skills of all students prior to upper-division work. However, the use of non-normed, holistically graded examinations for placement and for the upper-division examination does not allow assessment of the value added by the freshman composition program.

2. Currently, only UA has a comprehensive freshman writing program. ASU and NAU, for economical reasons, have isolated basic writers in non-credit courses offered on campus by local

community colleges. These courses, although required by the universities, are unconnected with their freshman writing programs. While the universities are developing procedures for assessing the impact of the developmental courses, it is too soon to evaluate the situation realistically.

3. ASU is using a crude, low cost system to determine which courses students should enroll in. ASU's freshman composition program is the least resource-intensive among the three univer-sities. The literacy programs at ASU, and perhaps to a lesser extent at NAU, have not received resources in keeping with the importance of their functions and the number of students served.

4. All three universities are in the process of developing rigorous, upper-division writing requirements for all students. Formal "writing across the curriculum" programs are being implemented at all three universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Each university should develop improved procedures to assess placement in and/or the impact of developmental programs for students who do not possess the literacy skills to meet the rigors of freshman composition. This assessment is especially important for ASU and NAU. The community college experiment should be evaluated within the next two years and action taken to correct the situation if the desired results are not forthcoming.

- A comprehensive review of the resources devoted to literacy programs at the three universities should be undertaken and deiciencies should be removed in the near future.

- An inventory of all special programs designed to increase the basic skill level of educationally disadvantaged students should be undertaken and the programs evaluated. Demonstrably successful programs should be expanded and the resources for expansion should be made available and institutionalized.

- Incentives should be developed to encourage an increasing number of faculty to participate in coherent and intensive "writing across the curriculum" programs.

- The size of college composition classes should be reduced to the number recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English.

- Establish at all three universities a solid core staff of full-time lecturers or academic specialists with interest, training and experience in the teaching of writing to help oversee temporary faculty and GTAs.

- Find methods of funding literacy education that reflect its cross-disciplinary nature.